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Book Notes: Franco Moretti's Graphs, Maps, Trees

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④ Book Notes: Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, and Trees*

TIMOTHY BURKE

Of all the odd things I've heard in recent years, one of the oddest would be that there are objections in principle to the research paradigm that Franco Moretti describes in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. It really doesn't matter what your interest in cultural or literary analysis is: what Moretti proposes is useful grist for your mill. There is no requirement to purchase the entire methodological inventory he makes available, or to throw overboard close reading or aesthetic appreciation or focus on a small and rarefied set of texts. Frankly, when academics propose that we only do what they're doing and stop doing everything else, I tend to ignore such propositions in the same way that I ignore commercial hyperbole while deciding what things I want to buy. I enjoy my iPod: I'm not required to think that it has changed my life or should lead me to chuck my stereo out the window. Whatever you think literary analysis and cultural history are, quantifying the subject of their domains is a very good thing. Indeed, it is a kind of knowledge long inferred and rarely acquired, and though its acquisition unsettles some assumptions made in the inferred known, it equally clarifies and strengthens many other claims—or least puts new and productive burdens on them.

Leave aside for the moment the particular kinds of mod-
elings and configurations of his data that Moretti describes,
and just stick with the numbers alone. Even in a single nation-
al literature, it used to be hard to make any clear statements
about the total number of books published in a given year or
across a long series of years, and of those books, what propor-
tion were works commonly known, analyzed, or regarded as
defining a “literature.” Now Moretti is not really so unusual
or isolated as he might appear in taking an interest in such
quantification, as Matt Greenfield has noted. There are many
subfields of cultural history and literary analysis that have
taken an interest in similar quantification and mapping, in
fact, the study of genres has long been shaped by an interest in
cycles of publication of the kind Moretti describes.

The numbers alone, as Moretti observes, immediately fal-
sify or complicate a series of conventional ways of understand-
ing cultural or literary change over time. When we speak of a
particular novel’s influence, or about how literature changed
in response to a particular work, we’re making claims that
ought to involve a total topography of published cultural
work. Until recently, that would not have been the case. If it
turns out that that the lineal descendants of a novel regarded
as influential are no more than half a percent of all work pub-
lished over a ten-year period, this puts pressure on what we
mean by “influential.” It is not that we are now forbidden to
make the claim, but it constrains and specifies what we can
potentially mean by such a claim. It’s just that Moretti does
help us to realize that often, in making such claims, we’ve
put too much trust in the representations and attributions of
authors and readers, which are just as produced and fantasti-
cal as any publicly uttered memories, just as Goffmanesque
in their performance as any other presentation of self. It is
not that we are forbidden either to speak of that novel’s qual-
ity or desirability, of what we (and past readers) might have

found enticing, inspiring, productive, mysterious in such a work. Moretti doesn't quantify the production of meaning, and even if he wanted to, he could not.

Enough on the simple virtues of Moretti's project. Of course cultural historians and literary critics need numbers, all of us, and godspeed to the counting and graphing. I'd love to see someone do something similar with major historical archives: count all the documents, all of them, and graph for me their types and forms. Historians live in their archives, but we don't really know them half as well as we ought to. We accept the categories that the archive offers us, and read along the pathways laid down. In researching consumerism and material culture in colonial Zimbabwe, I had to read horizontally across an archive for a topic that the archive itself did not recognize as lying within its confines, and the sense I got of what the archive contained was complicated considerably, relative to what I'd been expecting. Quantification could only help that understanding further.

What could enhance Moretti's work further? What do I see as genuine problems and gaps in the models he offers?

First, a warning: that counting publications only scratches the surface of the totality of cultural production in any given post-Gutenberg moment. This is an issue that RAPHAEL SAMUEL wrote about for years with regard to historians and their archives: that what lands in archives, is recorded as documentary evidence, is just a small and sometimes highly unrepresentative selection of the totality of potential grist for the historian's mill in a given era. Moretti may be counting formal publication and finding that what is commonly taken to represent "national literature" is not typical or representative, but beyond that lies an even larger domain composed of the ephemeral, the unpreserved, the unrecorded. In the age of electronic communication, we should be especially sensitive to this problem. Even with the Web being archived, much of

what has been written within it, and read avidly, is likely to be lost in the longer-term: asynchronous discussions, epistolary literatures passing through email, and so on.

There will come a point at which a project of quantifying cultural production in any given historical moment will only be able to gesture at a vast Oort cloud of unknown writings, performances, and texts, seeing the gravitational effects of some unseeable and lost Planet X tugging at the knowable and quantified. This especially strikes me as an Africanist: we now have some lovely examples of “MARKET LITERATURE” IN NIGERIA available in published form, but beyond those examples, I very much doubt we will ever be able to represent the numbers or varieties of such texts published. If we confine our understanding of what was typical or normal within a cultural form to what we can find in archives, in libraries, in catalogs, in records of publication, we’ll ultimately have a deformed conception of the totality. Beyond everything counted there is always another mountain of the uncountable. Historians of slavery turned over every stone and record TO COUNT THE TOTAL NUMBERS OF AFRICANS taken across the Atlantic, and even then, had to make some educated guesses, which still fuels (sometimes quite intense) debate among specialists in that field. But once some numbers were in hand, those historians realized that making any statements about their meaning depended on another set of numbers, namely, how many people there were in West and Equatorial Africa at any given moment in any given society, what the fertility rates were in those places, the numbers of men and women, and so on. All numbers which, frankly, are never going to be tallied through anything besides serious guesswork.

The second thing that occurs to me on reading Moretti is that we know quantifying publication and quantifying discrete elements (tropes, places, and so on) within publications doesn’t tell us half so much as we might think about

the quantification of readership and circulation. Again, maybe it's because I'm an Africanist that I'm especially wary in this regard. You can count up the numbers of newspapers published in a decade in southern Africa, including ones presumptively aimed at African audiences. You would be making a big mistake to assume that such numbers tell you how many people were reading or consuming those newspapers. We know from historical and ethnographic work that the literate often read or reinterpreted newspapers for the illiterate, and that a single copy of a publication was often passed around many readers. Texts travel through readerships in ways that numbers do not describe very well. Here I'd look to Elizabeth Hofmeyr's fantastic book on the transnational history of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for some insight, for a tracing of how a single work can traverse readerships in ways not precisely correlated with its appearance in libraries, archives, or even within texts that invoke, allude or cite Bunyan. There ought to be a sociology and social history of audience and reading that might complement Moretti's work, but my intuitive suspicion is that it would also very much complicate the claims he would like to make. I also think that the sociology of authorship and publication would be a useful complement to Moretti: to know who knows whom, who reads whom, and to which outlets and forms of publication they relate strikes me as retaining its importance.

The most important concern I have about Moretti is that I think he has the same problem that the *Annalists* and world-systems analysts have had with modernity: a difficulty explaining rupture, breach, or novelty. Novelty here in multiple senses: as Elif Batuman observes, the novel-form is what gets marked off in Moretti as something not explained. In world-systems history, this problem has lately been exaggerated to extremes by some of the founding practitioners in the field, as in Andre Gunder Frank's argument late in his life that

the contemporary world-system is part of a continuous five-thousand year old history, that modernity or the rise of the West is a temporary or epiphenomenal speed bump in a well-worn road, not anything genuinely new. The problem with a divergent tree of literary or cultural history is that it has a hard time explaining the appearance of genuinely new forms or genres: it is forced always to insist on a fundamental continuity. The best that the world-systems historians could do, if they didn't want to follow Frank's argument that modernity or the rise of the West was an illusion, was either to insist on materialist explanations of rupture (new technologies, new means of production) or to offer shopworn dialectics.

In evolutionary terms, Moretti is something of a gradualist; my impulse is to throw up the cultural equivalent of punctuated equilibria in reply, to insist that some genres and forms do not descend gracefully from predicates but emerge abruptly, catastrophically, like Aphrodite stepping from the waves. The evolutionary metaphor is a powerful one, but you want to take in even more of it than Moretti does. For one, it's fine to talk about the death of forms and genres, about how divergence fuels convergence that fuels more divergence. You can't have a metaphor that invokes evolution or speciation without death, or at least the removal of specialized forms. But it begs the question (and Moretti knows that it does) of what the fitness landscape is for cultural forms.

'Emerge' in fact is the operative verb here: I think Moretti's trees in particular could benefit enormously from reference to the body of work subsumed under the heading of "emergence" or "complexity theory." Because there is an answer within that body of work to Moretti's question: what explains the divergence of literary forms? It's not an especially comforting answer, perhaps, for either Moretti or some of his critics, because it may eschew some deep underlying explanatory principle for why some genres, tropes, modes

of literary representation produce an explosion of divergent forms and why others die. In an emergent system, the place within the topology of the system where complex structures appear may be effectively random. If we take Moretti's example of Sherlock Holmes, it might be that an evolutionary tree of British fiction in the last half of the 19th Century would help us to understand why the environment was friendly to "detective fiction," what the conditions of the cultural soil were like for the growing of a new tree. But as for how Doyle's stories set the conventions of a genre and others die, are forgotten or wither, some of that might be simply termed "dumb luck". The precise moment at which a genre crystallizes may involve accidents of readership, circulation, publication and imitation. We are not required to explain that moment by arguing that Doyle somehow uniquely intuited the needs and desires of a reading public, or was distinguished through extraordinary ability. I'm echoing Gould's *Wonderful Life* here very consciously. This is a rebuke of traditional literary theory, historicist literary theory and even Moretti all at once: all of them assume that there is a rational way to explain cultural reproduction which relates the successful, generative or meaningful text to some underlying condition of its being: an ideological or discursive fit to its environment, a skillful or superior authorial creation of an aesthetic, or some undiscovered underlying "law" of cycles and divergences. Here maybe Moretti needs to go the next step rather than running back for the materialist security blanket as he does in closing the book.

The accidental and the emergent are also, however, where we might reopen the door to agency, creativity and the will of the author and reader again. Because another thing that appears in literary and cultural history is the unpredictable generativity of authors and readers who reach from a high branch far back down the tree to create some new possibility

of representation, who take what was a junk gene in DNA of culture and from it express some meaning or representation that was deemed impossible the day before. Sometimes such authors are just Carlo Ginzberg's Menocchio, envisioning private cultural worlds that die or are forgotten; sometimes they are better situated, differently located, or even, dare we say it, more imaginative or skillful in how they excavate the literary past in order to produce new possibility. Just as I would in the end say that modernity is an emergent and in some ways accidental social structure which in turn creates the possibility for individual agency that then generates still other emergent forms through will, choice or deliberate selection, I think you can reconcile the agency of authors and readers with Moretti's graphs, maps and trees, but it does take coloring outside his lines to do so.

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http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/book_notes_franco_morettis_graphs_maps_trees/

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